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# Rates of SNAP Receipt Stabilize or Drop in All Regions for First Time Since Great Recession

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From the beginning of the Great Recession in 2007 until 2012, receipt of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits grew steadily.<sup>1</sup> Participation and funding rose to historic levels<sup>2</sup> driven by the changing economy, intensified efforts to enroll eligible populations, and expanded benefits and eligibility via the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Throughout the recovery, SNAP has acted as an economic stimulus and part of a safety net for struggling families. In 2013, SNAP receipt fell slightly—a decline perhaps indicative of a slowly recovering economy. However, substantially more households still reported receiving SNAP benefits in 2013 than before the recession.<sup>3</sup>

Although the proposed cuts are unlikely to be enacted in 2015, cuts will be debated and are likely to be a major component of the Farm Bill reauthorization debate, scheduled for 2018.

Despite the declines in SNAP receipt in 2013, the program remains an important support for populations at risk for food insecurity and hunger. There is currently substantial disagreement about the future of SNAP funding. The president's proposed budget for fiscal year 2016 made no substantial cuts to SNAP funding, and allotted additional funds to improving access to SNAP for seniors. By comparison, the budget resolution adopted by Congress cuts low- and moderate-income entitlements (outside of health care) by an average of one-third by 2025.<sup>4</sup> If cuts to income security programs are applied across the board, the plan would cut \$350 billion dollars over the next decade, from programs—like SNAP—that

## KEY FINDINGS

**13.5%**

The share of households receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits declined slightly between 2012 and 2013 from 13.6 to 13.5 percent, the first decrease since the recession began in 2007.



Across regions and place types (rural, suburban, and city), SNAP receipt declined or leveled off, breaking the trend of yearly increases recorded in every region and place type since the recession began.

**77.6%**

The share of SNAP households containing one or more workers increased modestly to 77.6 percent (up 0.9 percentage point), driven by a sizable increase (3.4 percentage points) in suburban places.

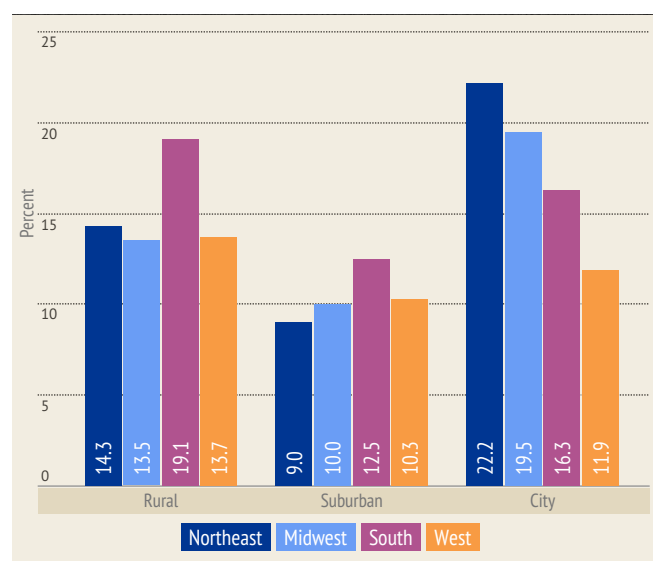
serve low income families. Although the proposed cuts are unlikely to be enacted in 2015, cuts will be debated and are likely to be a major component of the Farm Bill reauthorization debate, scheduled for 2018. Further, the impact of an earlier reduction in funding (November 2013) is not yet visible in most data, making it an important time to assess SNAP's reach.<sup>5</sup> This brief uses data from the American Community Survey to document rates of SNAP receipt in 2013, to track changes since the onset of the recession in 2007, and to monitor receipt by region and across rural places, suburbs, and cities. In addition, it examines levels of SNAP receipt among potentially vulnerable populations to determine how receipt has changed among these groups since the recession began.<sup>6</sup>

## Post-Recession Growth in SNAP Receipt Ends

In 2013, 13.5 percent of all households reported receiving SNAP, slightly lower than 13.6 percent in 2012. From the beginning of the recession through 2012, SNAP receipt rose substantially each year in all regions of the United States and across all place types. In 2013, however, SNAP receipt did not increase in any region or place type, and instead stabilized or declined in all areas.

Though overall growth in SNAP receipt ended in 2013, many of the longer-term patterns of SNAP receipt persisted. For example, receipt was highest in cities, where 16.6 percent of households reported receipt, followed by rural places (15.9 percent), and suburbs (10.8 percent). Further, rates in all regions and place types were still substantially higher than at the recession's start in 2007 (7.7 percent nationally) or at its official end in 2009 (10.3 percent). Regionally, the South had the highest rate of SNAP receipt, at 14.8 percent of households. At the intersection of region and place type, especially high rates were found in the rural South and in cities in the Northeast and Midwest (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1: PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING SNAP RECEIPT, BY REGION AND PLACE TYPE, 2013**



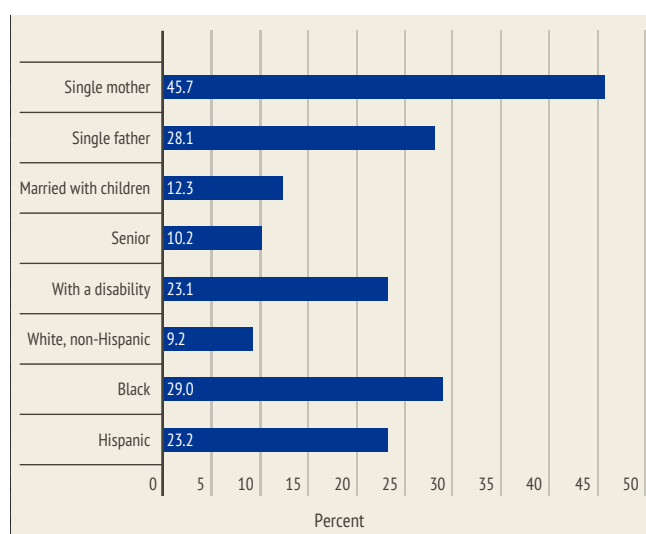
**Note:** For rural places, rates are significantly higher in the South than in other regions, followed by the Northeast. Midwest and West rates are statistically similar ( $p < 0.05$ ). For suburban places, rates are highest in the South, lowest in the Northeast, and similar in the West and Midwest. For cities, all regional differences are statistically significant.

**Source:** American Community Survey, 2013 one-year estimates.

## Single Parents Reported High Rates of Receipt

As SNAP receipt dropped slightly nationwide, declines were fairly evenly distributed across different types of households. Figure 2, which shows rates of SNAP receipt by householders' characteristics, indicates that rates remain especially high among single parents and non-white householders.

**FIGURE 2: PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING SNAP RECEIPT, BY HOUSEHOLDERS' CHARACTERISTICS, 2013**



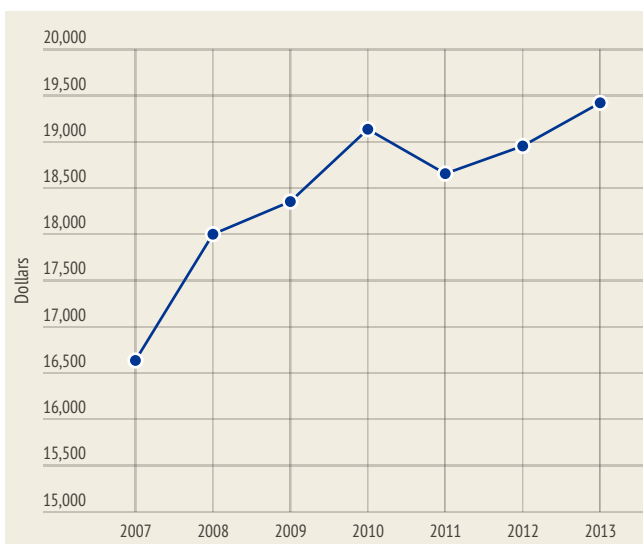
**Source:** American Community Survey, 2013 one-year estimates.

## SNAP Receipt Among Working Households

Because SNAP is a program for low-income households, the population most traditionally linked with SNAP receipt is the poor.<sup>7</sup> However, households that are “near poor” (that is, with gross incomes between 100 and 130 percent of the poverty line) are sometimes eligible for SNAP if their net monthly income is below the poverty line or if they meet certain age or disability conditions.<sup>8</sup> While poor households still make up more than half of SNAP households (51.4 percent), this share is lower than in 2012 (52.0 percent). In other words, post-recession, SNAP receipt has become increasingly common among households whose income is just above the poverty line.

Possibly related to this trend is the fact that since the recession, around three-quarters of SNAP households report having one or more workers. The share hit 77.6 percent in 2013, up 0.9 percentage point over 2012. This increase was driven nearly exclusively by households in the suburbs, where the share rose to 79.6 percent, up 3.4 percentage points since 2012. These high shares of working households are also reflected in the median income of SNAP recipients, which is well below the national median but nevertheless nearly 17 percent (in constant dollars) higher than at the start of the recession (see Figure 3). It appears that while SNAP households have higher incomes than in earlier years, these incomes are insufficient for meeting family food needs. For instance, it is possible that the lowest income families are receiving other forms of aid (for example, subsidized housing or child care vouchers) not available to higher-earning households, which frees up more money for food purchases among lower earners, and leaves higher earners more reliant on SNAP. Indeed, the Economic Research Service found that SNAP-participating households were more likely to report very low food security than were nonparticipating households, suggesting that food insecure households more often enroll.<sup>9</sup>

**FIGURE 3: MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME AMONG HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING SNAP RECEIPT (2013 DOLLARS)**



**Note:** All year-to-year changes are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).  
**Source:** American Community Survey, 2007–2013 one-year estimates.

Because this brief uses data collected throughout 2013, the effects of the cuts that began in November 2013 are not yet fully evident in our results. As debates continue and set the stage for reauthorization, the challenges of crafting fiscally responsible policy should be weighed carefully alongside the needs of the populations that use SNAP.

### Box 1: Definition of Rural, Suburban, and City

Definitions of rural and urban vary among researchers and the sources of data they use. Data for this brief are derived from the American Community Survey, which identifies each household as being within one of several geographic components. As used here, “city” designates households in the principal city of a given metropolitan statistical area, and “suburban” includes those in metropolitan areas, but not within the principal city of that area. “Rural” consists of the addresses that are not within a metropolitan area.

### Endnotes

1. Dottie Rosenbaum and Brynne Keith-Jennings, “SNAP Costs Falling, Expected to Fall Further: Trend Reflects Shrinking Caseloads and Recent Benefit Cut” (Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2014). Retrieved January 20, 2015 ([http://www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=4054#\\_ftn4](http://www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=4054#_ftn4)); Food and Nutrition Service, “Participation and Costs, 1969–2014” (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 2014). Retrieved January 20, 2015 (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>).
2. Rosenbaum and Keith-Jennings, “SNAP Costs Falling.” See also Randy Schnepf, “Consumers and Food Price Inflation” (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2014), 7-5700, R40545.
3. According to the Congressional Budget Office, decreases in SNAP participation tend to lag behind improvement in the economy by a few years (Congressional Budget Office, “The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program,” 2012). Declines in 2013 adhere to that pattern in that annual unemployment rates first began to decline post-recession in 2011 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rate,” 2014).

4. Joel Friedman, Richard Kogan, and Isaac Shapiro, “The Congressional 2016 Budget Plan: An Alarming Vision” (Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2015). Retrieved July 6, 2015 (<http://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-budget/the-congressional-2016-budget-plan-an-alarming-vision>).

5. The November reduction in funding was a result of the scheduled end to the 2009 Recovery Act’s temporary funding increase. For more details, see Stacy Dean and Dottie Rosenbaum, “SNAP Benefits Will Be Cut for Nearly All Participants in November 2013” (Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2013). Retrieved July 16, 2015 (<http://www.cbpp.org/research/snap-benefits-will-be-cut-for-nearly-all-participants-in-november-2013>).

6. Note that SNAP receipt data are derived from respondents’ self-report of SNAP receipt. Existing research shows that the American Community Survey systematically underreports SNAP receipt. For additional information, see Bruce D. Meyer, Wallace K.C. Mok, and James X. Sullivan, “The Under-Reporting of Transfers in Household Surveys: Its Nature and Consequences,” Working Paper 151818 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2009) (<http://www.nber.org/papers/w15181>).

7. Households are eligible for benefits so long as they are below 130% of the poverty guideline in terms of gross monthly income. For example, a family of four is considered poor if its annual income is \$23,850 annually (\$1,988 per month). A family of four is SNAP-eligible so long as its gross monthly income is below \$2,584 and its net income is below \$1,988. See Food and Nutrition Service, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Rules on Income Limits” (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2014) (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/income-rules-income-limits>).

8. Not all households with incomes this high are eligible for SNAP receipt; most must meet additional income tests regarding net monthly income. For detail, see Food and Nutrition Service, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Eligibility” (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.) (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/eligibility>).

9. See page 28 in Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Christian Gregory, and Anita Singh, “Household Food Security in the United States in 2013,” Economic Research Report 173 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2014).

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